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JACK ANDERSON and DALE VAN ATTA

Scenarios for a Soviet Attack on Iran

President Reagan's defenders have invoked the specter of a Soviet invasion of Iran as justification for the backdoor arms deal with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's henchmen. This would give the Soviet Union a stranglehold on the Persian Gulf, source of half the western world's oil.

Critics of the secret arms deal have scoffed. But Pentagon strategists have been warning for years of a possible Soviet invasion during the chaos expected to follow Khomeini's death. As early as 1982, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger focused his secret "Defense Guidance" on the assumption of such a Soviet attack.

Our associate Donald Goldberg has obtained some of the secret strategic planning papers, prepared annually to cover the following five years. The armed services use these guides to allocate their people and materiel around the world.

The Pentagon's concern over a Soviet invasion of Iran is nothing new. As we first reported in 1981, the Soviets staged a mock invasion of their neighbor in the fall of 1980, testing their command, control and communications system near the Iranian border.

The timing of the exercise suggested that it may have been merely a show of strength intended to dissuade President Jimmy Carter from a second military attempt to rescue the American hostages in Tehran.

By 1984, when the Defense Guidance for 1985-89 was prepared, a Soviet invasion of Iran was the most important "illustrative planning scenario . . . upon which to base force development

planning for the 1993 time frame and to assess risks in programmed forces." The scenarios "realistically portray enemy capabilities as indicated by current intelligence estimates," but were not intended as "a prediction of future events."

The chilling scenario used in that document supposes that 24 Soviet divisions would invade about two months after the central authority in Tehran begins to break down, presumably following Khomeini's death or some disruption of equal magnitude. Full-scale—but not nuclear—engagement between Soviet and U.S. forces would begin 30 to 40 days after the invasion.

Meanwhile, according to the war-game scenario, NATO and Warsaw Pact troops begin fighting in central Europe, starting with a Soviet bloc attack by 90 divisions. Simultaneously, North Korea attacks South Korea, requiring a swift U.S. infusion of reinforcements.

The 1984-88 Defense Guidance, written a year earlier, uses roughly the same sequence of events, though it includes a warning that the scenario should not be regarded as "approved war plans." However, the invasion scenario is intended to be the basis on which the armed services allocate their resources.

Interestingly, the main scenarios set out in the Defense Guidances do not include an escalation of superpower hostilities to the point of nuclear exchange. But a contingency plan does consider the delivery of 19 nuclear bombs by Air Force B52s against Soviet troops invading Iran. This "limited strategic option" suggests that somehow nuclear warfare could be confined to Iran.